

Falun Gong

Chinese spiritual movement

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Also Known As:

Falun Dafa Falungong

Date:

1992 - present

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[Li Hongzhi](#)

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Falun Gong, (Chinese: “Discipline of the Dharma Wheel”) also spelled **Falungong**, also called **Falun Dafa**, controversial Chinese spiritual movement founded by [Li Hongzhi](#) in 1992. The movement’s sudden prominence in the late 1990s became a concern to the Chinese government, which branded it a “heretical cult.”

Falun Gong is an offshoot of [qigong](#) (Chinese: “discipline of the vital breath”), an amalgam of traditional medical and self-cultivation practices developed in the early 1950s by members of the Chinese medical establishment as part of an effort to promote [traditional Chinese medicine](#) (TCM) in modern socialist [China](#). Although some members of the [Chinese Communist Party](#) (CCP) attacked such practices for their “superstitious” nature as well as for their links to [religion](#) and spirituality, proponents of TCM managed to carve out a place for qigong and other similar therapies alongside [biomedicine](#).

Qigong was available in some clinics and sanatoriums in the 1950s and early ’60s but was banned during the [Cultural Revolution](#) (1966–76) for its “feudal” history. It received a new lease on life in the late 1970s, when a purported laboratory discovery of the material existence of qigong energy dovetailed with a fundamental change in state policy away from revolution and toward [science](#) and [economic development](#). Overnight, qigong became “scientific,” a change in status that led to state approval for qigong activities.

Out of this conjuncture developed the qigong boom, a roughly 20-year period, spanning the 1980s and ’90s, when hundreds of millions of Chinese were drawn to a wide variety of qigong schools and practices in the socially freer post-[Mao Zedong](#) era. The leading figures in the boom were [charismatic](#) qigong masters such as Yan Xin and Zhang Hongbao, who built nationwide organizations, sold qigong manuals, and gave talks in sports arenas and other large [venues](#), which believers paid to attend. The masters were supported by qigong magazines and newspapers and by best-selling biographies of the masters themselves. Behind the scenes were government and military figures who believed that the study of qigong could be the key to creating a “Chinese science” that

would expand human potential and propel China to the forefront of the developed world. Although average practitioners were likely to have been drawn to qigong for health reasons, other currents in the qigong movement included experiments with [alleged](#) paranormal phenomena and [extrasensory perception](#) (ESP) as well as a wide variety of spiritual and cultural pursuits. It should be emphasized, however, that most advocates of qigong regarded it as a self-cultivation practice with a scientific basis and not as a religion, which is heavily regulated in China.

Although the qigong movement had high-level supporters, it also had detractors, who condemned qigong as superstition and [chicanery](#). By the early 1990s such critics had gained the upper hand in swaying China's political authorities. It was in an effort to restore the qigong movement's flagging fortunes that Li Hongzhi in 1992 founded Falun Gong ("Discipline of the Dharma Wheel"), whose name referred to the revolving wheel that Li promised to install in his followers, purifying their bodies "in another dimension" and freeing them from bodily concerns. Li's original message sought to dispel qigong's associations with fraud and [faith healing](#) by emphasizing "higher-level cultivation." He also initially gave his lectures free of charge, relying instead on sales of his books and other Falun Gong paraphernalia. Whether it was the message or the man, Falun Gong grew rapidly in popularity, and Li followed the familiar path of other charismatic qigong masters, giving dozens of well-attended high-profile talks and building a large nationwide organization between 1992 and 1995. Estimates of the number of Falun Gong's adherents during this period vary greatly, ranging from about 2 million to 60 million.

However, the advent of Falun Gong did not end [criticism](#) of the qigong movement, whose revival turned out to be short-lived. In early 1995 Li decided to resettle in the United States in the apparent hope of avoiding political problems caused by the continuing denunciation of qigong in the Chinese media. His departure changed Falun Gong in a number of ways. First, upon leaving China, Li announced that his newly published text *Zhuan falun* (1994; "The Revolving Dharma Wheel")—in fact a transcription of a nine-part lecture series—would henceforth serve as the focus of Falun Gong practice. Followers were to read and reread the sacred text, sustaining their relationship with Master Li as they did so. That change was important in the [context](#) of the broader qigong movement, in which manuals had traditionally served as how-to books and guides to cultivation but not as sacred texts (although *Zhuan falun* could be downloaded from the [Internet](#) for free, followers were not allowed to write on the pages of the work). The content of *Zhuan falun* also stressed demonic and apocalyptic themes that other qigong texts had only hinted at.

Second, despite Li's absence and the generally falling fortunes of qigong and Falun Gong, most Falun Gong followers in China continued to believe that their practice was completely legal, as high-level debates on the subject within the government had been inconclusive. Accordingly, when faced with media criticism, Falun Gong followers reacted by peacefully demonstrating at the offices of newspapers and television stations. Finally, in a massive and unannounced gathering on April 25, 1999, some 20,000 Falun Gong adherents protested outside CCP headquarters in Beijing.

That demonstration, which took party leaders completely by surprise, marked the end of the qigong boom and largely sealed the fate of Falun Gong as a Chinese movement. The party soon declared Falun Gong to be the greatest danger to state security since the 1989 [student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square](#) and banned the movement as a “heretical cult.” However, because of the surprising strength of Falun Gong in the Chinese diaspora—particularly in the United States and Canada—China was not immediately successful in suppressing the movement. Falun Gong followers championed their cause in the Western media as an issue of freedom of religion, until a number of self-immolations by alleged Falun Gong adherents in [Tiananmen Square](#) in January 2001 convinced much of the Western media that the group was indeed a “cult” (Falun Gong followers insisted that the immolations were staged by the Chinese government). Falun Gong subsequently established its own media outlets—including the *Epoch Times* newspaper, the New [Tang Dynasty](#) television network, and the Sound of Hope radio network—and continued to resist what appeared to be an ongoing campaign of repression in China.